

## Politics and society in post-war France

Following German occupation between 1940 and 1944, France undergoes in the post-war years a period of reconstruction — arguably a period of transformation. Substantial growth in the population precipitates a series of important changes in French society. The French state, in the years immediately following the war, embarks on a programme of social development through the renewal of the economy. Since the war, France has consolidated its identity as a modern, pluralist, more individualistic society. The structures of French society shift markedly as a result of these developments, whose significance is itself widely debated in contemporary France. To what extent is the experience of France exceptional in post-war society today?



### ONE | SPACE AND SOCIETY

France is a large and complex country, with its territory and its society having connections both to northern Europe and to other Mediterranean societies. In this lecture, we will examine the spatial and social transformations of postwar France — a period in which the population has increased by a third. In particular, France has become a more urban society — while it has also notably decentralized since the 1980s.



### TWO | PERSONS AND CLASSES

Like other western societies in the same period, France experienced a demographic boom between 1945 and the early 1960s. Growth in the population led to long-term social changes — in the experience of social mobility, in the emergence of youth as a distinctive category of social experience, in shifts in the identity of social classes and social interactions. From the 1950s onwards, France also developed as a consumer society.



### THREE | STASIS AND REVOLUTION

The French sociologist Michel Crozier described France of the 1960s as a 'société bloquée'. We will examine the tensions and conflicts in French society which led him to take this view and will examine also the changes France has witnessed since that time — in particular the events of May 1968 and their longer term impact — with a view to seeing whether these can be characterized as 'revolutionary'. We will consider the emergence of the Fifth Republic and the institutional changes which it brought about, and the transformations of the Left in France in the 1960s and especially the 1970s.

### FOUR | POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY

Under the constitution of the Fifth Republic, the office of President has become the primary focus of electoral politics in France — leading to the progressive emergence of a bipolar system, with major party blocs on the right and the left. But since the 1980s in particular, political life has notably fragmented, with the emergence of multiple social identities and more fluid — sometimes more extreme — voting patterns. To what extent is the left-right distinction still valid in French politics today?



**FIVE | YOUTH**

The experience of young people in France was substantially transformed in post-war France. The Cold War gave particular prominence to the left–right divide in shaping political awareness in the 1960s and 1970s; for more recent generations, politics, like other areas of life, are increasingly experienced as spaces of experimentation, with the transition to independent life and insertion into the active population coming at later points than for previous generations. These changes point to a marked acceleration of individualism in shaping attitudes and practices in French life.

**SIX | GENDER**

Changes in the lives and experiences of women in post-war France have been so marked that some commentators characterize them as revolutionary. Women's lives move beyond the traditional sphere of *la femme au foyer*: participation rates in higher education and in the active population increase sharply from the mid-1960s onwards, and the professional, social and political experiences and outlooks of women and men increasingly converge. Gender was a significant focus for the extension of individual rights, with the legalization of contraception and abortion, the passing of equality legislation and wider social reforms, like consensual divorce and the reduction in the age of majority.

**READING**

The first item that you should read is Martin Evans and Emmanuel Godin, *France: 1815–2003*, in particular chapters 8 to 12. <<http://library.ucc.ie/record=b1510955>>

A useful compendium of data on social change in France is provided by Laurence Duboys Fresney in *Atlas des Français aujourd'hui*. <<http://library.ucc.ie/record=b1546228>>

To explore the topics on which we have focused further, you can turn to Rod Kedward, *La vie en bleu: France and the French since 1900*, in particular chapters 14 to 16 and 18 to 21. <<http://library.ucc.ie/record=b1520603>>

An important French-language source that deals with the scope and impact of social change in post-war France is Henri Mendras, *La Seconde Révolution française: 1965–1984*, in particular chapters 9, 10 and 12. <<http://library.ucc.ie/record=b1234586>>

Finally, there are useful chapters on gender and politics by Janine Mossuz-Lavau and on youth and politics by Anne Muxel in Pascal Perrineau and Luc Rouban, eds, *Politics in France and Europe*. <<http://library.ucc.ie/record=b1998461>>